

**SERMON: The New Covenant – Glorify our Father: Jeremiah 31. 31-34; John 12. 20-33**

Dear Lord, each day we take breath, through our thoughts, words and deeds, may we follow the example of Jesus and glorify you, our Father. Amen.

Who knows a famous poem published by bush poet John O'Brien in 1919? That was his pen name- he was actually Roman Catholic priest Patrick Joseph Hartigan. **Said Hanrahan**

*"We'll all be rooned," said  
Hanrahan, In accents most forlorn,  
Outside the church, ere Mass began,  
One frosty Sunday morn.*

*"It's looking crook," said Daniel  
Croke;  
"Bedad, it's cruke, me lad,  
For never since the banks went  
broke Has seasons been so bad."*

*And so around the chorus ran  
"It's keepin' dry, no doubt."  
"We'll all be rooned," said  
Hanrahan, "Before the year is out."*

*"If rain don't come this month," said  
Dan, And cleared his throat to speak  
—"We'll all be rooned," said  
Hanrahan, "If rain don't come this  
week."*

People like Hanrahan who are spouting constant negativity, tend to get on our nerves. Not the most popular person in the neighbourhood! I think that's why I couldn't help but think of this poem when I read the passage from Jeremiah.

**Jeremiah 31.31-34 – The Old Covenant to End**

Most of the prophecies Jeremiah was directed to give to the Jewish people of Judah spoke of gloom and doom. From the king right down to the average person in the street, he criticized and condemned them all for not honouring their covenant with God. While his message was clearly from God, nevertheless, the response of the Jewish people to Jeremiah was to beat, imprison and ostracise him. They really wanted him to change his tune!

AND in today's reading the message God gave Jeremiah does just that. In these three short verses he foretells of a wonderful new covenant that the Lord will make with the house of Israel and the house of Judah!

How would you describe it?

Now, to understand the significance of the New Covenant it's helpful to compare it to the Old Covenant. So let me ask you, how would you describe the Jewish Covenant of the Law?

The Old Covenant was based on actions by only the Jewish people. If they fulfilled all the rules and regulations proscribed by the Law then they and their nation would be saved. It was essentially a theology of salvation through works. As G. F. Pentecost suggests: *The law commanded and the subject had to obey. The law of Moses did not take account of thoughts or motives, only of actions. The action was not that of faith, but of works.*

But the Israelites and Judeans were just like us- fallen people prone to wander away from God. The old covenant was repeatedly broken in spite of all the teaching given to the people by their high priests.

### What purpose did it fulfil?

It begs the question: What purpose did the Old Covenant fulfil? Paradoxical as the expression sounds, the very breaking of the covenant furnished the proof of its success. As C Young explains: *It was necessary to show the hopelessness of all covenants of works. It made their position before God clearer to them; it prepared the world for Christ.*

### **John 12. 20-33 – the New Covenant**

It is a vital moment in our spiritual journey when we realise that there is nothing **we** can possibly do that would ever restore our relationship with God. It is only Jesus who can fulfil this prophecy. Jeremiah speaks of three elements that radically distinguish the new from the old. The first is within Verse 33: *I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.*

For an understanding of this verse our gospel reading provides some clarity. In John 12 verse 26, as in many other parts of the gospels, Jesus speaks of the intimate heart relationship we need to have with himself, the Son of Man. <sup>26</sup> *Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.*

### How do we serve Jesus?

It raises the question: How do we serve Jesus? We can serve others for all sorts of reasons. It can be for personal gain, in expectation that the fruit of our service will be for our own benefit. It can be because we are forced by others to do so and the fruit then is deep resentment. Or it can be for much more altruistic motives. We genuinely care about the person we serve and the fruit of that service is a deep, abiding love. It is to this type of service that Jesus invites us. He doesn't want us to follow him out of fear or because of what we

think we will get from him. He wants us to follow him because he is our friend, someone we totally admire and trust. Think of the people in your life for whom you wholeheartedly give of yourself. I'd hazard a guess that you know them deeply, all their ins and outs. There may well be a sense of gratitude and admiration for what they have done in their lives for you and others. How much more should we have that gratitude and admiration towards Jesus. This is the Son of Man who endured the greatest humiliation and suffering so that we could be freed from the Old Covenant. He longs for us to stop obeying God out of a sense of duty and know him as our loving father instead. As we grow in that relationship, the Two Great Laws are indeed written on our hearts: loving God with all our heart, soul and mind and loving our neighbour as ourselves. That is how we serve Jesus.

### How do we know God?

The second element of the New Covenant that Jeremiah described is in verse 34: *<sup>34</sup> No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord.* Here the question raised is: How do we know God?

The Jewish people of this time relied upon their spiritual leaders to teach them about God. They were separated from God, with their high priests providing their access to and knowledge of Yahweh.

In Hebrews 5 verses 8 to 10 we are told:<sup>8</sup> *Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered;* <sup>9</sup> *and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him,* <sup>10</sup> *having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.*

The Hebrew reading also tells us that Jesus was appointed by God a high priest not just for his physical lifetime but for ever. Through that role, not just the Jewish people but all people who acknowledge and obey Him will gain eternal salvation. All people from the least of them to the greatest will know God because they know Jesus. In John 8 19 the Pharisees ask Jesus: *Where is your father? He answers: "You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also."*

So under the New Covenant how do we know God? It is by knowing Jesus; by looking to the example he gave us. As we strive to live our own lives as he lived his, we are drawn closer to our Father. That is the journey we embark upon as followers of Jesus.

## How do we gain forgiveness?

The third element of Jeremiah's prophecy is contained in verse 34: *for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.*

Under the Old Covenant the high priest had elaborate rituals through which the Jewish people could be forgiven their sins. It often involved the sacrificing of animals and they had to keep doing it over and over again. It raises the question: Under the New Covenant how do we gain forgiveness?

In verses 27 and 28 of our gospel reading Jesus tells us: <sup>27</sup> *'Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—"Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. <sup>28</sup> Father, glorify your name.'* Then a voice came from heaven, *'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.'*

He is speaking of the reason for his impending crucifixion. Under the New Covenant Jesus made the one final and complete sacrifice on the cross for the forgiveness of all our sins. And not only are our sins forgiven but Jesus confirms in other texts that God completely forgets them; our sins are erased from his memory. You will have heard this many, many times but I invite you to quietly reflect on the enormity of this truth.

This forgiveness is not based on our actions; it is a gracious gift from our Lord. So how do we gain forgiveness? By glorifying our Father through faith in Jesus. Yet, if you're anything like me, it is so easy to forget this. We can agonise over our failings, labouring earnestly to conquer this sin and that, acting for all the world as if we're still under the Old Covenant, thinking that it's what we do that will make the difference. But as S Conway puts it:

*the new covenant is a promise, is the assurance indeed, that God has taken the matter of our salvation into his own hands. It is all of grace; he gives everything; nothing is left to our own solitary effort... The whole covenant with regard to us, the people of God, now stands thus: "I will give this; I will bestow that; I will fulfil this promise; I will grant that favour." The old covenant said, "Do this, and thou shalt live." The new says, "I will do all."*

Let me finish in prayer:

Beloved Father, we stand before the Cross and glorify you. We thank you for your gift of forgiveness made possible only through your Son's act of supreme love. All glory, praise and honour be to you, now and always. Amen